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ABSTRACT

Intended for school personnel, this report contains the findings and results of a pilot developmental kindergarten program in a Duval County, Florida school district that traditionally emphasized an academic kindergarten program. The report provides the baseline data that was the impetus for implementing the developmental program, the objectives of the program and how they were met, and the quantitative and qualitative results of the program. The staff found an unusually high number of students--among the 200 children tested--who scored low on the basic skills areas of language development, auditory perception and memory, motor skills, and visual perception, on the Santa Clara Assessment Test. However, the first year of the pilot program was considered successful for two reasons: (1) teachers' knowledge of child development made them better able to distinguish between normal maturation and behavior, and learning disabilities; and (2) each child engaged in activities at complexity levels they could manage while remaining able to meet the county's expectations for skills acquisition. Concluding remarks offer suggestions for program implementation. (RH)

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DEVELOPMENTAL KINDERGARTEN AND ITS BENEFITS

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ABSTRACT

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Intended for school personnel, this report contains the findings and results of a pilot developmental kindergarten program in a school district that traditionally emphasizes an academic kindergarten program. The report provides the baseline data that was the impetus for the developmental program, the objectives of the program and how they were met, the quantitative and qualitative results of the program, and concludes with cautions for implementing such a program.

DEVELOPMENTAL KINDERGARTEN AND ITS BENEFITS

Introduction

A dramatic shift from the original purpose of kindergarten has occurred in the past 20 years. Originally, kindergarten (children age 5) was established to help "children to a good start in developing healthy bodies and happy, well-integrated personalities" (Peterson, 1958, p. 7). Kindergarten was to provide a broad spectrum of meaningful learning experiences for "language development, manipulating materials, sensing meanings and relationships, developing work habits and attaining social maturity" (p. 143). It was believed that as children responded to these experiences they would become interested and motivated to learn.

There are few remnants of the early purpose of kindergarten evident today. Technological prowess has lead many to assume that with children's exposure to the world that they are more advanced developmentally. As a result of this assumption Egerston states, "[Kindergarten] curricular expectations are at least one year more difficult" and the acceleration of skills and learning experiences creates frustrating and failure oriented school experiences for children (1987).

Developmental is defined as a set of purposely coordinated active learning experiences to insure sound and healthful growth of young children in four characteristic areas: social, emotional, physical, and intellectual (Cheever and Ryder, 1985; Extensions, 1987; Yawkey and Silvern, 1975).

The program that is discussed in this paper was piloted in an elementary school in Duval County, Florida. The purpose of this presentation is to: 1) suggest that developmental curricular expectations are more appropriate for kindergarten; 2) relay the ways that the pilot Developmental Kindergarten Program implemented the change from an abstract, symbolic curriculum to a concrete, hands-on one; 3) share the results of the program's initial implementation; and 4) conclude by identifying cautions in implementing these types of programs.

Academic Kindergarten Curriculum - Inappropriate?

Academic kindergarten curriculum which emphasizes mastering abstract, symbolic skills and achievement discounts the integration of the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of children. Translating concrete operations into abstract ones involves successive structures which must be integrated. According to Piaget and Inhelder (1966/1969) the beginning of restructuring thoughts and ideas from concrete to abstract generally occurs about the age of 11 or 12.

The results of an Educational Research Service survey that appeared in Principal showed that 22% of the 1,228 principals surveyed have academics (skills and achievement) as the primary focus of the kindergarten program. Sixty-three percent (63%) have preparation (academics and social readiness) as the primary focus. Eight percent (8%) have developmental (child development) as the primary focus (1986). In summary, 85% of the kindergarten programs represented in this survey ignore two to three of the characteristics (physical, social, emotional) of a child. Yet

the interaction of the four characteristics makes up the individual.

There are at least three reasons why academic curricula are inappropriate for kindergarten age children. First, each age group has different needs, interests, and abilities. Researchers (Cheever and Ryder, 1986; Elkind, 1986; Extensions, 1987; Peterson, 1958; Piaget and Inhelder, 1966/1969) show that young children learn most effectively through movement, their senses, and language interaction. For the young child the process is more important than the product. Academic curriculum does not tap into those early childhood learning processes. To be successful in the academic curriculum a child is expected to sit still, have an unusually long attention span for their age, give meaning to and show application of numbers and letters using the most abstract of instructional materials - worksheets and pencils. In addition, the focus of the academic curriculum is on product not on process. Mastery of specific isolated skills is essential for success.

Second, academic curriculum emphasizes only one part of the child - the intellect. By focusing on one characteristic of the child the social, emotional, and physical needs are ignored. For example, the "simple" act of writing requires physical development of eye-hand coordination and fine motor development that most 5 year olds do not have. Or, a physical development that is needed for reading called ocular pursuit, which is the ability for the eyes to move in a tracking pattern, is not developed until about the age of 6. Developmental programs

integrate the intellectal coupled with the physical, emotional and social characteristics of the child.

Finally, an underlying assumption of academic curriculum is that certain children are not ready for school because they are not ready for the curriculum. This creates an environment of early exclusion for many children. On the other hand, concrete, hands-on curriculum assumes that every child is ready for something. The curriculum is flexible enough to adapt to the skill level of the child. There is a sense of inclusion for children. Charney, Clayton, Finer, Lord, and Wood (1984) found "the developmental age of a third to a half of the children in any grade make them unready for the appropriate age level material of that grade, as well as for the social expectations of the age group" (p. 10).

Development cannot be rushed. It must be allowed to take its natural course. When children are over placed some area of development which is not addressed will suffer. Often the signals of over placement are mistaken for other problems and the child is generally referred for special placement. As with all of us, young children want to be successful with what they do but when they are in over their heads their frustration and fear of failure manifest itself in other dysfunctional and disruptive behaviors.

Many children appear to be ready for task that emphasize worksheets and pencils. Egertson points out that this occurs for two reasons. First, children at this age are eager to please. Second, they are adept at memorizing. "That they can give back

information is taken to mean that earlier 'academics' are beneficial" (1987).

Those concerned with "gifted" kindergarten children may be prone to believe that developmental programs will not provide them with sufficient stimulation. "Those advocating developmentally appropriate kindergartens are not suggesting settings that do not challenge the precocious. In fact, a learning environment organized around concrete, open-ended materials has a better chance of stimulating the 'ready' than does the paper wasteland of many kindergartens" (Egertson, 1987, p. 28).

Readiness suggest that a certain amount of maturity exist for children to handle certain experiences. Maturity is not only intellectual but also physical, emotional and social. It is our experience that when the curriculum design disregards the natural developmental maturation of children over placement tends to occur and children are forced to operate at a frustration level of learning. We find that a developmental kindergarten program places kindergarten children at a developmental learning level where social, emotional, physical, and intellectual growth can take place at a normal rate and provides them with successful learning experiences. Kindergarten was designed to prepare young children for learning not for first grade. Somehow we lost that focus.

Developing and Implementing the Developmental Kindergarten Program

Mayport Elementary School piloted the Developmental Kindergarten Program because administrator, Primary Resource Teacher,

and kindergarten staff determined that Duval County's kindergarten curriculum did not adequately meet the developmental needs of children they served. The staff believed that children with normal abilities were failing due to inappropriate curricular expectations and instructional materials.

Annually, over 200 kindergarten students are enrolled at Mayport Elementary School. Analysis was conducted on school based data and results from the Santa Clara assessment test. The data revealed the following: 1) an unusually high percent of students who had less than 6 month gains on the Santa Clara in the areas of language development (50%), auditory perception and memory (50%), motor skills (40%), and visual perception (40%); and 2) a high percent of students being referred for first time retention (25%) and multiple retentions (40%), child study teams (30%), and disciplinary action (30%).

The pilot program participants established three objectives for the program. The remainder of this section presents the objectives and some of the activities involved to meet the program objectives:

Objective 1: Provide kindergarten staff (teachers and aides) with the necessary knowledge of developmental characteristics and behavioral characteristics which ensue from development.

Examples:

A. Teachers attended workshops on the Gesell developmental philosophy. (Although Gesell was used for training in this program the important aspect of inservice training is not that it has to be Gesell but rather that teachers receive some type of child development training.)

B. Kindergarten aides received training in the following skills and information so they could better fulfill their roles as instructional assistants: developmental

philosophy, questioning techniques, interacting with parents, giving children directions, understanding the objectives of learning activities.

Objective 2: Develop a curriculum design which meets the developmental needs of kindergarten children and identify appropriate instructional materials.

Examples:

A. The school population was analyzed for socio-economic status, stability, and prior school experience, to name a few.

B. Meetings were held twice a week for staff to work on clarifying their expectations, goals and objectives for kindergarten students in light of developmental theory.

C. Duval County's curriculum skill expectations were reviewed and compared with those developed by the school staff to identify any gaps in skill development.

D. Alternative programs were observed and early childhood education conferences were attended.

E. Child development consultants observed teachers' behaviors, classroom climate, and teachers' and aides' interaction with students to suggest changes needed to operate in a developmental environment.

F. Instructional materials to were matched and constructed to County objectives at the complexity levels of very concrete, concrete, semi-abstract.

Objective 3: Gather and analyze data to evaluate student growth and development as a result of implementing a developmental Kindergarten curriculum.

Examples:

A. Administer the Santa Clara assessment instrument for a pre and post assessment of kindergarten students.

B. Weekly observations were conducted by the principal.

Results of the Pilot Developmental Kindergarten Program

The staff found unusually high number of students who score low on the Santa Clara assessment test. The analysis revealed significant deficits in the basic skill areas of language development, auditory perception and memory, motor skills, and visual perception. Early in their planning the staff realized that the developmental curriculum would have to encompass the system's present Instructional Management Objectives and remain consistent with the Duval County Pupil Progression Plan.

The first year's implementation of the Developmental Kindergarten Program yielded several quantitative and qualitative results. We believe that the first year was successful for two reasons. First, the teachers' knowledge of child development made them better able to distinguish between normal maturation and behavior, and learning disabilities. Second, each child engaged in activities at complexity levels they could handle and still meet the County's skill expectations.

Quantitative Results

The Santa Clara was used for pre and post assessment of students' developmental growth. The percent of students who showed six or more months growth for each skill area after being in the developmental program for eight months is in Table 1.

Table 1

N = 206

Skill Areas	Percent With 6 Or More Months Gain
Motor Coordination	68%
Visual Motor	78%
Visual Perception	76%
Visual Memory	63%
Auditory Perception	60%
Auditory Memory	73%
Concept Development	64%
Language Development	61%

Other quantitative results include:

- Reduction in student retention by 25%.*
- Reduction in child study team referrals by 48%.
- Reduction in disciplinary action by 58%.

Qualitative Results

Result: Clarification of kindergarten goals and objectives.

Examples: Kindergarten teachers and the principal reached consensus on what are appropriate kindergarten curricular expectations for their school.

A developmental kindergarten curriculum guide was written which has goals and objectives, sample activities at three progressively difficult developmental levels, and a skills checklist. This was done for each of the eleven skill identified by the County's curriculum.

* This does not include children in the transitional class.

Result: Development of a means to analyze each skill presented in the developmental curriculum.

Example: Skills were separated into component parts (e.g., language perception, visual perception, fine motor) and a checklist was developed with sub-skills for each skill component.

Result: Increase in teachers' abilities to match learner with appropriate instructional materials.

Example: Teachers developed and constructed learning activities which matched the skills on the checklist. The activities are progressive in difficulty (very concrete, concrete, semi-abstract).

Result: Students exhibit responsible, independent, problem solving behaviors.

Examples: They seek out peers who have mastered a skill rather than always going to the teacher.

They independently get instructional materials and complete the activity.

They independently convert an activity into a higher level skill activity. For example, a one-to-one correspondence activity was converted into a number equation activity.

Result: Improvement in students' attitudes toward learning and school.

Examples: Learners want to share what they learned with others.

There is an increase in learner participation in group activities.

Result: Improvement in planning, communications, and cooperation among teachers.

Example: Teachers meet on their own to write curriculum, share ideas, develop and construct learning activities, and prepare for and conduct the aides' training.

Result: Improvement in communication between teachers and parents.

Examples: More parent-teacher conferences to inform parents about the program.

More parent observations in classes so they can carry some experiences home.

Parents create and make learning activities for the classroom following a parent learning activity workshop.

Cautions for Implementing a Developmental Kindergarten Program

As rewarding as the benefits of a developmental kindergarten program are, there are some cautions which should be highlighted:

- Developing learning activities which match the learners is critical. Be realistic about the development levels of the students.
- Parents must understand the reasons and underlying premise for changes in the instructional program. Bring them along with you by conducting parent workshops.
- Administrators and teachers being knowledgeable in child development is the foundation of a developmental program. Conduct training in child development before planning the program or developing instructional materials.
- Stopping and starting of the regular class activities because of the scheduled resource classes (music, art, physical education) can be an ineffective use of time. Block scheduling of the resource classes would enable all kindergarten classes to be involved in one of the three resource classes simultaneously. Blocking scheduling then allows all teachers to have a planning time at the same time.
- Aides must be viewed as instructional assistants. Take the time to train the aides to fulfill their roles.

In summary, kindergarten should be viewed as a preschool program which provides active learning experiences for five year olds. Developmental programs are designed to provide the needed experiences and integrate the social, physical, emotional, and intellectual characteristics of the age group. What resembles play is actually their most effective way of learning.

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